

Bigger herd, hormones cited as deer collisions soar in region

By Alexander Reid
GLOBE STAFF

You're driving along a wooded stretch at night, eyes focused ahead. Quick as a flash, a brown streak bolts across the road, too fast for you to hit the brakes. WHACK! You've hit a deer.

That's what happened Nov. 3 to Dick

Zaccardi, as he drove along Route 53 from his Hanover office to his home in Duxbury. "I was driving, going about 40 miles an hour," recalled Zaccardi, who said he still is shaken by the sudden encounter that night.

"I was on the Pembroke-Duxbury line," he said. "Out of nowhere came this deer. It was right in front of my car. I didn't have time to put on the brakes. I hit it and

couldn't stop for another 100 feet. I got out and saw the poor animal limp into the woods. It was so sudden."

Deer collisions like Zaccardi's are becoming much more commonplace on the region's roads these days. While no one keeps deer accident statistics, police departments and state officials have a number of anecdotes suggesting that the frequency of these ran-

dom collisions is sharply on the rise.

Middleborough Police Lieutenant Judith Wiksten said five deer-car accidents were reported on the Nov. 6-7 weekend in her town, three of them on Route 44.

"Things are bad," said Wiksten, the department's commanding officer. "The deer are either running into the path of an oncom-

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Dick Zaccardi of Duxbury holds the mirror of his car that was damaged along with its front end and door panel when he collided with a deer recently. Damage was estimated at \$3,000.

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ing car or into the side of them," Wiksten continued. "There's no way a driver can be prepared. You don't know when it will happen."

Duxbury Police Officer Cully Rossi, the department's accident investigator, said 10 car-deer collisions were tallied in his town in the past month. "Deer are all over the place," said Rossi. "Having one hit by a car used to be a rare thing. That's not so anymore."

The collisions usually occur at night where roads thread through wooded, less populous areas.

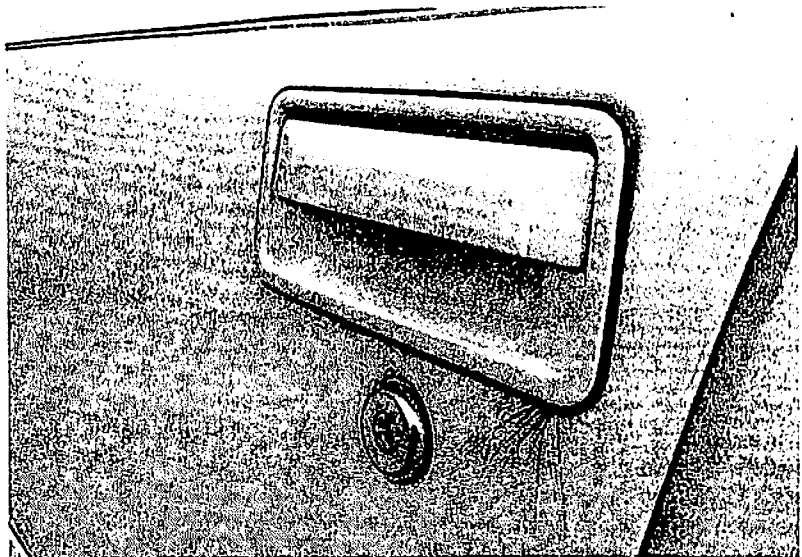
Lakeville resident Donna DeMarco hit a deer two weeks ago while driving home from work, just after 5 p.m., in a rural section of town. "It was pitch black, and out of the left side of my eye I saw a buck in midair," she said, recalling the sight of the animal seconds before it plowed into her car.

DeMarco, 40, said the accident occurred on Country Road, not far from her home. "He landed on my windshield and roof," she recalled. "He also took out the left front fender. The body shop said it was about \$3,000 in damages."

DeMarco was luckier a week later when she narrowly avoided a second deer collision when a doe ran across the road, about 10 feet from her car, as she drove to work. "I was more aware because of what happened the week before, so I just hit the brakes, and it ran off into the woods," she said.

There are two main reasons why these types of accidents are on the increase. First, deer are more plentiful. The herd in Massachusetts has doubled since 1985 to as many as 90,000 deer, according to John E. MacDonald, a deer biologist with the state's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. MacDonald said this amounts to 15 to 25 deer per square mile in southeastern Massachusetts.

"The concentration is higher in some places," said MacDonald, who heads the agency's research of deer. "They've managed to do this in spite of the rapid development of these areas. It shows how good they are at adapting."



Deer's hair remains imbedded in the door handle of Zaccardi's car.

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JOHN E. MacDonald
Deer biologist with the state's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife

Indeed, as subdivisions and development encroach on their once-wooded and rural environs, the deer are thriving. They eat ornamental shrubs and plants that people cultivate in their backyards. State and local hunting restrictions provide deer with safe havens, particularly near residential communities and subdivisions where regulations limit hunting.

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A second factor behind the acci-

dents is more a phenomenon of nature. This is the rut, a time of year when male deer are roaming the woods looking for mates. The season lasts from early November until the end of December.

"Not only are there more deer, but they're all on the move," MacDonald explained. "It's a very active season. They're just roaming about. They're oblivious to cars and roads."

This is not good news for unwary motorists. Every day, assorted dead animals - possums, raccoons, skunks, and sometimes foxes - are seen draped along local roads. But deer are a much different matter and far more dangerous to motorists. A male deer, or buck, can weigh close to 200 pounds and carries a rack of sharp-tipped antlers on its head.

A collision with a car, even one traveling at modest speed, could cause thousands of dollars in vehicle damage. "Cars today are made out of lightweight metals and plastics, so if you hit a deer, that's going to cause a heavy amount of damage," said Kingston Police Lieutenant Thomas Kelley, whose department has been called to more than a dozen accidents in the last month.

A collision with a deer is also perilous for the driver and passengers. "If you hit a raccoon you might feel a

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bump, you hit a deer it's boom," said state Environmental Police Officer Lorne D. Estabrook, whose region includes areas in Carver, Plympton, Middleborough, and Lakeville.

In Sharon, which is more wooded than many local communities, police Lieutenant J.J. McGrath, said he has seen a drop in the number of accidents over the past year. He thinks drivers are more wary when traveling at night or at dusk, when deer are more likely to be up and about.

"We had about 12 accidents during October and November last year, and this year we haven't had any so far," said McGrath. "People know there are more deer around, and if they're on the road when it's dark they're extra cautious and they go slower."

Environmental Police are summoned to the scene of deer accidents by local police. Estabrook estimates that he and others in his regional office have seen about 40 deer accidents since mid-October, a figure he

said underrepresents the number of accidents, since many minor collision aren't reported.

"These animals are moving when they get hit, it's like they're in flight," Estabrook continued. "If one jumps onto the hood it could easily go through the windshield. They have hooves and the bucks have antlers. They could seriously injure someone."

Even in accidents with no injury to humans, the crash aftermath is usually grisly. Officers often have to shoot injured deer with their service weapons to end the animal's suffering.

"There's usually some blood from the deer and a badly damaged car," said Estabrook. "The driver's distraught because they can't believe what's just happened. You have a dead or dying animal laying on the road, or if it's hobbled off into the woods we go in after it to put it down if we can find it. It's not a pretty scene."

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